

Where I'm From

by Jo Ann Butts

I'm from my ancestors four generations handed down
born 1950 in the same old log cabin as they,
To the last child born to her,
From her spirit she breathed life into me,
it sets in the bottom, old but still strong,
Like a woman waiting for her child to return,
To her calling for me, I feel her presence where I'm from.

From between two hills of Middlefork, in Elliott County
up Coal Branch Holler I was born and raised,
From digging, chopping, using grubbing hoes,
To dark rich dirt, plowing up a new ground, where I'm from.

From back roads, mud holes, Whippoor Wills, butcher knives,
To June apple tree, potato onions, daddy's bunion,
From old cow bell, Kate's Mule collar,
To doctoring with Coal oil, Bayer Aspirins, and Vick Salve,
always going barefoot first day of May.

From Wright-Watson our two-room school,
potbellied stove, outside toilets,
red light, red rover, hop-scotch with broken colored glass,
teachers writing on chalk boards, dusting erasers,
To Mommy's cat-head biscuits with jelly inside,
carried to school in a lard can.

Where I'm from the teacher taught reading, writing, arithmetic,
once a month a little missionary woman Miss Barix,
taught us about God,
To standing in line saying verses for Gospels, and New Testaments.
From buses with snow chains,
walking a mile out of the holler to catch the bus,
To cold feet, frost bite, poorly clad attire
not enough warm clothes where I'm from.

From old coats and overalls, cut, sewed repurposed,
quilt lying flat on the living room floor,
tacked, with thick darning thread,
To knots tied by little hands.
Spread over our bed, kept us warm through the night,
when the fire died out.
Heads covered up, breathing through peep holes, where I'm from.

From Copperheads to headboard chewing gum,
totin' baby sister on my hip, while watching two other ones,
To the squeeking sounds of the old porch swing
as I sing baby sister to sleep;
Roosters crowing, chores, shotgun shells,
always feeling old no matter how young I was.

From Flour sacks, Feed sack dresses and shirts, both ends sewed,
To stitched threads carefully unraveled,
From old big coat buttons, toys made into Buzz buttons,
To string for Jacob's ladder, crows feet,
carried in our pockets, where I'm from.

From swollen creeks, foot logs,
brown glass bleach jugs bobbing up and down,
To going on up the road, climbing up and over a hill
just to get back home.

From thunder in February, to frost in May,
From sunrise to moonshine,
cows, chickens, hogs and dogs,
To mule and sled, big hands little hands, all shucking corn,
the love of family, together surviving hard times.

From groceries and liquor, bought on credit,
paid with winter's tobacco check,
To boxes of Bananas, apples, oranges,
chocolate drops smashed between two crackers,
From peppermint logs, fire crackers, and Christmas candy,
To drinking, abusing, staying with grandparents,
then going back to the same old thing, where I'm from.

From never hearing the word "Sex," or the phrase "I'm bored",
was ten when a girl said babies grow in your belly;
we wasn't suppose to know any of that back then;
you didn't sass, you never said no,
the leather strap was not just used for shaving;
To do it right the first time,
or you'll have to do it over, where I'm from.

From planting, plowing, chopping, hoeing, gathering,
To preparing, eating, canning, drying, laying up for winter,
From great life skills learned,
To small hands that wash inside jars,

I'm from living off the land, the dirt the trees,
they keep me alive; I'm apart of these hills,
I breathe, I eat, I am nurtured by the ground.

From barefoot, bee stings, sand briars,
creek beds, flat rocks, watch for snakes;
To countless buckets filled with blackberries,
walnuts, and pawpaws, where I'm from.

From memories made by children circled round
many little hands, fingers working,
shelling corn into old wash tub,
corn took, ground into meal,
To Mommys' call, "Supper's on the table"
seven places set, with glasses filled with cows milk,
Soupbeans, cornbread, fried taters, and sauerkraut,
fried apples, fresh churned butter,
we never went hungry, where I'm from.

From baby's in the playpen, Angels on guard,
snakes in the creek, and dog in the yard,
Run there's cows in the corn;
To search for little brother, he's missing again;
found him in a old tractor tire fast asleep.

From hot dusty hay fields,
waspers, hornets, bumble bees, yellow jackets nest,
To only having three frozen ice cube trays;
From daddy saying "Go fetch us a bucket of water
from the north side of the well,"
To us cooling our feet by wading in the creek.

Where I'm from Grandparents were like Angels,
who helped us survive, Mommy's too busy canning,
To Grandma in her apron white hair in a bun,
came to stay a few days until the work was done;
feet rocking her treadle sewing machine,
making school clothes.

From Grandpa tall and stately, always neatly dressed,
helping hoe out our tobacco crop,
patch, after patch, after patch,
To a surprise for us when done, in his car trunk,
A big tub filled with ice cold watermelon,
glass bottles of pop and big candy bars floating all around.
that was like heaven for a day, where I'm from.

From a time almost forgot, many sayings, same topic,
"be seen and not heard,"
"a little pitcher don't have big ears,"
"do as you are told,"
To "always say Aunt and Uncle,"

From daddy saying, "One thing I can't stand is a liar,"
To "If I can't make you mind, I'll send you to reform school."

From I will lift up my eyes unto the hills,
from which cometh my help.
To daddy pointing his finger saying,
"If that man there is goin' to heaven
I ain't worried about gettin' there."

From the old copper wind up clock, loudly ticking;
minutes, hours, days, weeks, years,
life time of memories made, some painful,
To strong family ties;
working, eating, playing, sleeping side by side,
taking care of each other, cause family matters where I'm from.

From the old saying "things come full circle,"
I couldn't grow up fast enough to leave home,
but I did, and moved to Ohio,
found love, married, had a son of my own, but awaken,
To the feeling, the hills and cabin were calling unto me,
my ancestral heritage was speaking, pleading for my return.

From listening with my heart,
we made the move back to the hills of my youth.
"I have now come full circle,"
To proudly saying, "I live once again where I'm from."

Poem by Jo Ann (Watson) Butts from 1950-1968 era of time that I lived up Coal Branch Holler of Middlefork, in Elliott County KY. I returned to KY in 1999. Only it is called Coal Hollow now.